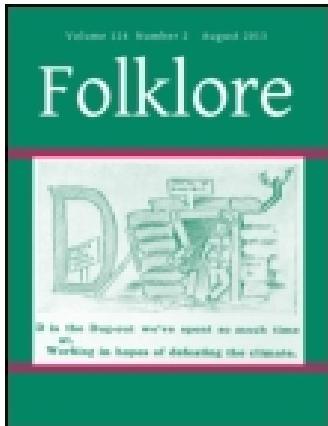


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The Folklore of the Stranger: A Consideration of a Disguised Wandering Saint

CARMEN BLACKER

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THE folklore of Japan is full of references to the mysterious figure of a Stranger, who wanders into a village from an unknown 'outside' world. The word for a Stranger in Japanese, *ijin* or 'different person', has a wide connotation. An *ijin* can be a traveller, for example, whose way of life is wandering, in contrast to the static agricultural life of the village. He may be a wandering woodcarver or tinker, a travelling priest or strolling player. An *ijin* can also be a foreigner from another country 'outside' Japan, a Dutchman, Portuguese, Chinese or Englishman. And he can also be an avowedly supernatural being, outside the human race. The Wardens of certain pools, for example, who are believed to be snakes, and to be ready to lend lacquer cups and bowls to those who wish to borrow them for a party, are referred to as *ijin*. So are the uncanny *yamabito* or 'mountain people', said to be seven or eight feet tall, to be covered with hair or leaves, to have supernaturally glittering eyes, and to live deep in the mountains beyond human habitation.

The word is thus used in a variety of ways to signify people who come into 'our' world from an alien space outside a certain invisible barrier. Whether the barrier surrounds the village, the country, or the human race itself, the space beyond resolves into what Edward Said called imaginative geography; a world devoid of myth, meaning and recognisable cohesion, and on which we are therefore free to project whatever images or fantasies our culture may suggest.

The person coming amongst us from this outside world, from which the known distinctions of life are obliterated, can never be of us. He is excluded from the network of relationships and hierarchies which comprise our community; he must therefore refract round it, either above or below. Our instant reaction is to see him as a threat, bringing perilous pollutions from his alien land, and to expel him from our midst. But a moment later we perceive that at the same time he possesses strange occult knowledge, magic or medicine, beyond our experience. We therefore refrain from expelling him, with curses and stones, and instead disarm him with hospitality; we treat him with all the ritual of a guest, which will elicit from him blessings rather than harmful enchantments.

The Stranger is therefore an ambivalent figure. He is at the same time a saviour and a threat; at the same time superior to us, noble, highborn and possessed of helpful magic power, and below us, base, polluted, magically weakening, to be driven out.¹

In Japanese folklore this ambiguity is often expressed by the symbolic device of disguise. The Stranger is noble, royal or holy, possessed of powerful magic, but he is disguised as a filthy beggar. Be careful therefore how you treat strangers as they pass through your village. Do not be rude to filthy beggars or throw stones at them, because they may be princes or powerful priests in disguise.

The subject of my remarks here is one of the many legends found all over Japan and testifying to the passage, long ago, of a noble Stranger through the place. The Stranger is disguised, and woe betide the village that treats him with the contempt and rudeness

usually meted out to beggars. The legend bears an uncanny resemblance to certain folktales found in Europe. Here too a noble, holy Stranger wanders about the world disguised as a beggar, rewarding kind treatment with blessings and requiting unkindness with curses. These stories too will be considered, and the problem addressed of how such similarities could have come about.

The *densetsu* or local legends found in such profusion over Japan, and which appear to commemorate the passage of a mysterious Stranger, are usually focussed on a tree, a stone, a well, bridge or pool. The noble personage, who is always disguised as a beggar, filthy, destitute or pursued, paused to sit under the tree, or to hang his saddle over a branch, or to tie his horse to the tree, or to rest on the rock, or to wash in the pool. The tree, the rock, the pool, is thenceforth singled out, given a special name and the usual tokens of holiness; a fence cordons off the holy space, a belt of straw girdles the tree, a small altar is provided for offerings, and a story warns you not to pick the leaves or sit on the stone or bathe in the pool, or you will fall sick and die.

The wandering Stranger is usually identified in history; he is given the name of a historical character and a niche in historical time. But the guises allowed him are not unlimited. He may be a Prince, exiled from the court, and wandering disguised and disgraced over the land. Or he may come as a warrior, usually of the noble Heike family descended from the Emperor Kammu, but defeated in a 'last battle' in the late 12th century, fugitive and pursued. The personage may also be a Lady, once beautiful and talented, a poetess at Court, but now old, ugly and destitute. And lastly the wanderer may be an eminent Buddhist priest, renowned for his virtue and magic, but likewise disguised and to all appearances a filthy beggar.

The legends may often expand into a little more anecdotal detail. This is the pine tree under which the defeated and pursued warrior Minamoto Yoshitsune sat to take a brief rest and try out his new flute. This is the stone on which the priest Rekikai sat to chant the Lotus Sutra, when a reverent crowd of dragons from the nearby pool gathered to listen to the holy sounds.

Perhaps the only equivalent spots in this country are our Royal Oaks, where Charles II in the course of his wanderings hid to avoid his pursuers. But we have no such trees or stones to commemorate the flight of any of the knights of King Arthur, scattered after the last battle and seeking refuge in the Welsh hills. Nor of the Abbot of any suppressed monastery, fleeing to avoid execution. Not even the disguised Jesuits, such as Edmund Campion, travelling the country in the 16th and 17th centuries to bring the Mass to recusant families, have left any trace in our folklore of their wanderings.

But in Japan the catalogue of such places fills an entire volume. Yanigita Kunio, the great pioneer of folklore in Japan, commissioned in 1950 a collection of such legends. The resulting volume, *Nihon Densetsu Meiz*, classified into trees, plants, rocks, bridges, springs, wells, pools, tombs, caves, old houses and shrines, comprises 433 pages and many thousands of entries.²

The particular legend which we now consider, however, and to which Japanese folklorists attach much importance, concerns an eminent Buddhist priest and a miraculous spring of water, with variants in vegetables, fruit and fish. Known as the *Kōbō-densetsu*, or the *Kōbō* Legends, the stories are found widely distributed in almost all parts of Japan. The 'theme tune' runs as follows: Kōbō Daishi, the founder of the Esoteric School of Buddhism in Japan, and one of the renowned names in Japanese Buddhism, arrived one day, disguised and wandering, at a certain village where water was scarce. He begged a cup of water

from a woman in the village, who put herself to great trouble to fetch him water from a distant well. Kōbō Daishi thereupon struck his staff into the ground, and instantly there bubbled up a spring of pure abundant water, which ever after has been a boon and blessing to the village.

The spring is known thereafter as *Kōbō-shimizu*, or Kōbō's Spring, and the seventy-one examples recorded in Yanagita's catalogue are now recognised to be only a few of the total number to be found throughout Japan.

The story then takes the disguised Kōbō Daishi to the next village, where water is abundant and delicious. Again he asked a woman for a cup of water, but she was too lazy or greedy to put herself to the trouble of fetching him even a drop. Again he struck his staff into the ground, and this time all the wells in the village dried up, or the water turned sour and undrinkable, so that the formerly prosperous village was ruined.³

Variants of the theme are found which involved vegetables, fruit or nuts. Instead of a cup of water, the wandering beggar asks for a sweet potato (*imo*). When he is churlishly refused he makes all the potatoes in the village hard as stones and inedible. These legends, known as *ishi-imo*, stone potatoes, or *kuwazu-imo*, inedible potatoes, are recorded for the islands of Shikoku and Kyūshū, as well as in central and northern districts of the main island. Pears and peaches are likewise recorded as blasted tasteless and inedible. Chestnut trees on the other hand are recorded in many places to be so blessed by Kōbō Daishi, in gratitude for a meal given him during a time of want, that they bear fruit three times a year (*mitabiguri*), or occasionally twice a year (*futatabiguri*).

The great antiquity of the legend has been inferred from the fact that the food which is requested is always pre-agricultural. Kōbō Daishi never asks for rice or millet, though an instance is recorded of the 'coxcomb soy bean' (*keitomame*) thus blessed into fecundity.⁴

In certain parts of Japan the holy disguised figure bears some name other than Kōbō Daishi. In Gumma prefecture he is Dengyō Daishi, the founder of the Tendai School, and along the coast of the Japan Sea Hōnen Shōnin and Shinran Shonin, the founders of the Amidist faith, are commonly credited with the miracle. The same type of story—that kindness to a disguised beggar is rewarded and unkindness punished—is occasionally found associated also with the exiled Princes or the fugitive warriors. Professor Yoshida Teigo has further shown that the same story is found in fishing villages with regard to the deity Ebisu, in whose gift lies luck in fishing catches. Any peculiar object, even a corpse, washed up from the sea, might be Ebisu in disguise, so be careful to treat it respectfully.⁵

The name of Kōbō Daishi is, however, by far the most commonly found as the hero of the story.

Oddly similar tales are to be found in many parts of Europe. The motifs of the disguised wandering god or saint, usually Christ, who rewards hospitality and punishes inhospitality, are clearly distinguished, widely distributed, and clustered together in several Types. Stith Thompson and Antti Aarne's *The Types of the Folktale* gives us type 750, for example, in which Christ and Peter grant a poor peasant who receives them kindly three good wishes, and a rich and stingy one three bad or wasted wishes. Type 752 is *Christ and Peter in the Barn*, in which Christ, forced by his greedy host to do threshing in return for a night's lodging, performs a fire miracle; the unkind peasant tries to imitate him with disastrous results. But it is Type 751, the *Greedy Peasant Woman*, which is particularly relevant here, for it was under this heading that Hiroko Ikeda, in compiling her *Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk Literature*, 1971, chose to classify the Kōbō Legends.⁶

A problem here presents itself. How did such marked similarities come about between a tale found all over Europe, and one widely distributed over Japan? Japan is well outside the 'India to Ireland' range which was assumed when the Type and Motif Indexes were compiled to be the known range of diffusion. When the Motif Index was first compiled, indeed, little was known about the body of folktales and legends in Japan; comparatively few had at the time been systematically collected, and fewer still translated into any language other than Japanese. Hiroko Ikeda however distinguished no less than 439 types of folktale in Japan which corresponded well enough with Stith Thompson's classification to be listed under those headings.

No one as yet, however, has properly addressed the problem of how such correspondences can have arisen. Could they be due to diffusion, the tales having been brought by migrating or immigrating peoples from Central Asia in prehistoric times? If so, we do not yet know how or when this can have occurred. Or do they arise from independent origination, the human mind expressing itself in the same configurations or symbols in different parts of the world without any conscious borrowing? Some of the stories listed by Hiroko Ikeda, such as *Kobutorijii*, which is an almost exact analogue of the 'Gifts from Little People' story found in Wales and Brittany, and *Mamako to Ido*, which is uncannily similar to Grimm's *Mother Holle*, seem to show a more complex similarity of structure than is usually thought possible by coincidence.⁷

But to return to the Kōbō Legends, which Ikeda classified under the *Greedy Peasant Woman*, Type 751A. Let us compare the versions of the tale found in Europe.

Several stories are listed under this heading in the *Types of the Folktale*, in which Christ, or Christ and Peter, punish churlish treatment with a curse. In the tale which gave its name to the type, the disguised Christ, passing through a village, asks a baker's daughter for a morsel of the bread she is kneading. She takes a very small lump of the dough and puts it in the oven, where it miraculously swells to enormous size. Too big, she says, and refuses to give it to the beggar. She then breaks off an even smaller morsel and tries again, only to find that it swells to even greater size. The third attempt, with a mere crumb, grows so big as to fill the whole oven. Finally the woman refuses to give any bread at all to the disguised Christ, as the piece is always too big.⁸

As a punishment for her greed and stinginess, Christ turns her into an owl. Here, incidentally, is the origin of Ophelia's odd remark to the King in *Hamlet*, II, 5, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter." Words which for centuries were taken to be the mere ravings of a deranged mind were discovered, by a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1804, to be a valid reference to an old folktale well known in Shakespeare's day.⁹

In versions of the tale found in Scandinavia, the bird is a woodpecker, condemned to eat only the meagre fare between bole and bark of the tree. In German versions, the bird is a cuckoo. In the High Atlas of Morocco the Berbers have a similar tale, but here, naturally, the divine figure is not Christ but the Prophet, and the food denied to him is not bread but meat. The rich but stingy host—the only version of the tale, incidentally, where a man, not a woman, denies the requested food—refuses to kill a sheep, but instead throws a cat into the stewpot. As a punishment he is turned into an owl, as in the English versions, and the cat is rescued and brought back to life.¹⁰

The tale is also found in Russia, Turkey, Finland, France, Spain, Italy and Hungary.

Is it possible that this story and the Kōbō Legends have a common origin? Or is it more likely that the resemblances are coincidental, and that the legend derives from a completely different source from the Greedy Peasant Woman tales?

In favour of the common origin theory, the remarkable coincidence of structure of the first part of the story can be adduced; the disguised wandering divinity, his request for the simplest possible food or drink, the stingy, lazy or greedy *woman* who refuses the request and the curse which punishes her. These are telling similarities.

But against the attribution of a common origin, and in favour of an independent origination in Japan, telling arguments can also be adduced.

First, we have already seen that the Kōbō Legends are only one amongst a larger complex of stories, all of which attest the passage of a miraculous Stranger who rewards hospitality and punishes rudeness. The wandering figure to whom the miracle is attributed is not always Kōbō Daishi, but in different districts can be another eminent Buddhist priest, an exiled Emperor or the god Ebisu. In most cases, however, Kōbō Daishi, or another name ending in Daishi, 'great teacher', seems to be preferred.

We are hence led to wonder whether, underlying all these various names, there might lie an older prototype. A travelling god, for example, who is expected to descend into the village from his own world at a fixed season, and who requires the correct ritual of hospitality and offerings if he is to dispense the seasonal blessings that the village needs; a god who will further, if the correct ritual is denied him, blast the offending village with curses. If the cult of such a divinity were forgotten or overlaid, his traces might survive in stories and legends. A myth frequently passes into a legend. Kōbō Daishi therefore becomes a convenient appellation to attach to an otherwise forgotten god.

Yanagita suggests that it is perfectly possible to identify just such an archetypal wandering divinity, whose name has been forgotten or distorted, but whose paradigmatic actions have been preserved in legends. The clue to his identity lies in the name 'Daishi'.

The title *Daishi* in the names of Buddhist prelates is written with Chinese characters meaning 'great teacher'. Written with different characters, however, the word can mean also 'large child', and can be read with the older pronunciation ōigo or ōiko. This Ōigo, or Daishi, Yanagita argues, was one of the many divinities who in pre-Buddhist times were believed to wander over the land, and at stated seasons visit villages and homes. Here at a seasonal ritual, the visiting gods, represented by masked men of the village, would be offered food and wine, and begged to confer blessings on the community. Now in many parts of Japan, Yanagita continues, there are still religious groups known as Daishikō, dedicated to the worship of the old wandering god Ōigo or Daishi, who would expect a visit from 'daishisama' on the night of November 23rd-24th on the old lunar calendar. On that night Daishisama will call in disguise, and must be given food and a hospitable welcome. There are even tales of unsuspecting travellers being forcibly dragged into houses and pressed to eat a celebratory meal of red-bean gruel.

In north-eastern districts the visiting Daishisama is believed to be poor and hungry, and also lame, so that he leaves distinctive footprints in the snow. It is said that in one village a woman, in her eagerness to feed the visitor properly, went to the lengths of stealing some rice for his supper; her telltale footprints, however, were at once obliterated by a sudden fall of snow, miraculously caused by Daishisama.¹¹

This ancient divinity with the name of Daishisama was in other parts of the country easily overlaid, with the spread of Buddhism, by a Buddhist priest with a title which sounded the same as the old name. The titles of Kōbō Daishi and Dengyō Daishi sound exactly the same as the old name, especially to the unlettered. The image of a wandering visiting divinity is hence easily projected on to certain magically powerful Buddhist priests with plausibly homophonous names.

If Yanagita is right in his inference, then the Kōbō Legends must derive from a source entirely unconnected with the Greedy Woman folktale, found so widely distributed over north and eastern Europe. It rules out any possibility that the similarities of structure in the tale are due to diffusion by some prehistoric migrating people.

A further argument in favour of independent origination is the element, so important in the European stories, of transformation into a bird. The Greedy Woman is transformed into an owl, a woodpecker or a cuckoo. No such fate awaits the lazy woman in the Kōbō tales. It is the food and water, not the woman, which suffers the curse, so that the entire village is thereafter cursed with bad water or inedible potatos.

In Japanese folklore there is no motif of a woman transformed into a bird as a punishment for greed. Transformation of woman to bird does indeed occur, but in an entirely different context. The 'woman' is in fact a bird in the first place, and has only temporarily transformed herself into a woman in order to requite a debt of gratitude to a man. Here we have the well-known type, akin to the Melusina and Swan Maiden stories, of the *tsuru-nyōbō* or crane-wife.¹² A crane whose life has been saved by a man nobly transforms herself into a woman in order to marry him. She brings him prosperity, but imposes on him the single taboo that he must never look on her while she is weaving. She sacrifices her feathers to weave him a wonderful robe, but resumes her crane form and leaves him for ever when he breaks the taboo. This 'women-into-bird' motif is thus far removed from the baker's-daughter-into-owl one.

We are left therefore with the strong probability that the Kōbō Legends derive from a source different from the analogous European tales, similar though they may appear. But we are left too with the puzzle of how the similarities came about. Why should the figure of a wandering disguised saint provoke such similar tales in such widely separated places, when all evidence points to a separate origin?¹⁴ Why should, for that matter, two old men, with an ugly wen on either cheek, in Japan and in Wales, dance well or badly for fairies and be rewarded and punished in identical ways? Why should two girls, a beautiful step-daughter and an ugly real daughter, fall down a well, find themselves in a meadow, and, in Japan and Germany, meet an old woman who rewards and punishes them in exactly similar ways? These questions, which seem no longer to interest the main thrust of folklore research, are still unsolved and still pertinent.

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NOTES

1. There has been an interesting surge of books in Japan recently on the subject of the Stranger or outsider, of which Akasaka Norio's *Ijinron Josetsu*, 1985, and Komatsu Kazuhiko's *Ijinron*, 1985, are examples. General studies include Georg Simmel, 'The Stranger', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff, Illinois 1950; Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'The Stranger, the Guest and the Hostile Host', in *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology*, ed. J. G. Peristiany, Hague, 1968; A. M. Hocart, 'The Divinity of the Guest', in *The Life-giving Myth*, London 1952.

2. Yanagita Kunio, ed., *Nihon Densetsu Meij*, Tokyo 1950. Since this date the distinguished collection *Nihon Densetsu Taikei*, in 15 volumes, each with a different editor, has appeared listing all the prominent local legends, with relevant maps and commentary.

3. For studies on the Kōbō Legends, see Gorai Shigeru, Kōbō-shimizu, *Mikkyō Kenkyū* No. 81, May 1942; Miyata Noboru, *Miroku Shinkō no Kenky*, chapter 3, 'Daishi-shinkō to Miroku', Tokyo 1975. Also the discussion in R. D. Dorson, *Folk Legends of Japan*, Tokyo 1962, of Saint Kōbō's Well, pp. 33-35.

4. The vegetable, fruit and soy variants are mentioned by Minakata Kumagusu in one of his many erudite contributions to *Notes and Queries*, August 18th 1923. In the course of a discussion about magic and medicinal stones, he specifies that Kobo Daishi, or Combadaxus, turned the sweet potato *Colocasia antiquorum* into the hard and bitter *Alocasia Macrorhiza*.

5. Teigo Yoshida, 'The Stranger as God: the Place of the Outsider in Japanese Folk Religion,' *Ethnology* XX, no. 2, April 1981.

6. Hiroko Ikeda, *A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk Literature, FF Communications*, No. 209, Helsinki 1971. The relevant motifs are: K 1811: Gods or saints in disguise visit mortals. Q 1.1: Gods or saints in disguise reward hospitality and punish inhospitality. Q 45.1: Angel entertained unawares. Hospitality to disguised saint rewarded. Note also similar motifs for a wandering disguised *king*: K 1812.13, Incognito King rewards strangers who treat him as a companion.

7. *Kobutorijii*, the story of a good old man with a wen on his cheek who danced well at a party of demons, who removed his wen, later sticking it on the cheek of a bad old man who danced badly, was first recorded in the 12th century collection *Uji shūi monogatari*. This work has been translated into English by D. E. Mills, *A Collection of Tales from Uji*, Cambridge 1970. 'How someone had a wen removed by demons' is story 3, pp. 137-140. A very similar version, with demons replaced by korrigans, comes from Brittany. Hiroko Ikeda classifies it under Type 503 'The Gifts of Little People': dwarfs take hump from hunchback and place it on another man. In *Mamako to Ido*, the stepdaughter and the well, the girl drops a plate down the well, and is forced by her cruel stepmother to go down to fetch it. Her adventures are similar to the stepdaughter in *Mother Holle*, though the cow is not unnaturally absent. In *Mother Holle*, it may be further noted, the girl is spinning by a well, and drops her spindle into the well by mistake. The motif of a woman spinning or weaving by a well or pool is likewise common in Japan. Pools with legends attached to them with the name of *hataori-ike*, weaving pool, are common in many parts of Japan, and usually indicate that the pool is an entrance to an underworld, that a goddess resided there long ago who constantly occupied herself with weaving, or that a wandering woman who passed by with a loom in her hand was thrown in as a foundation sacrifice in building a dyke. See *Nihon Densetsu Meiji*, pp. 228-9, and *Nihon Mukashibanashi Jiten*, Tokyo 1977, p. 871.

8. Katharine Briggs, *Dictionary of British Folk-tales*, Part I, Vol. I, p. 124. Another version is on p.112

9. *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1804, Vol. 74, p. 1003. 'E.C.' says that this 'old fairy tale, well known to the nurses of Herefordshire', is a better explanation of Ophelia's remark than that of Dr Johnson, who claimed the correct version to be a *banker's* daughter, because the bankers in Lombard Street lived at the sign of the Owl.

10. See J. B. Smith, 'Misers and Woodpeckers', *Folklore* 99, (1988), and James Byron, 'North African Bird Lore: New Light on Old Problems', *Folklore* 98 (1987), pp. 152-174. The Norwegian version is in G. W. Dasent, *Popular tales from the Norse*, Edinburgh 1859, pp 213-4. Note also the interesting gypsy connection: the Romany name for the owl is Maromengro's chavi, or 'baker's daughter'. C. G. Leyland *English Gypsies and their Language*, London 1873.

11. Yanagita Kunio, 'Daishi-kō no yurai', in the longer essay 'Nihon no Densetsu', *Teihon Yanagita Kunio Shū*, Vol. 26, pp. 152-164. Hori Ichirō, *Nihon Shukyō no Shakaiteki Yakuwari*, Tokyo 1962, discusses the wandering *daishi* as a giver of skills, pp. 301-2.

12. *Tsuru-nyōbō* is classified by Ikeda as Type 413A.

13. Note also the Hungarian story in which Christ asks for a cup of water from a cowherd resting by a well, and torments his herd with flies when he is refused; the shepherd who gives him a cup of water has his sheep released from the torment of flies. Linda Degh, *Folktales of Hungary*, London 1965, pp. 181-2.